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# THE CENTENARY OF FLAUBERT

BY WILLIAM H. SCHEIFLEY

SINCE his death in 1880, the fame of Flaubert has steadily grown. Remy de Gourmont early acclaimed him as the chief writer of his century in France; François Coppée styled him "the Beethoven of French Prose"; and Jules de Gaultier declared that he alone among the French could rank with Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Goethe. Flaubert regarded his consecration to art as a priesthood, and prose as an art even more difficult than poetry. Scorning popularity and in no hurry to "arrive," he replied at thirty-one to Maxime Du Camp, who had urged him to "get his name into print": "As for myself, I am not seeking port but the high seas. If I am wrecked there, I excuse you from mourning for me." Although never included in the French Academy, Flaubert is now eagerly claimed by romanticists, realists, and naturalists alike. On May 22 last the celebration of his centenary was officially opened at Rouen and at Croisset by Léon Bérard, Minister for Fine Arts. Chief among the addresses were those by M. Bérard and J. H. Rosny of the Goncourt Academy. But the grand climax of the centenary will not come until December 12, Flaubert's natal day, when there will be unveiled in the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris a fitting monument to his memory. Thus in the same year that France has observed the centenary of de Maistre, Baudelaire, and Feuillet, she will pay homage, also, to three more broadly national personages—Napoleon, La Fontaine, and Flaubert.

This arch-enemy of everything "bourgeois" was born of a typical bourgeois father, married to a woman of aristocratic stock. From his Norman mother Flaubert inherited romantic traits—pride, imagination, contempt for the mediocre, fondness for the grotesque and love of art. From his father, a surgeon of Champagne descended from a line of physicians, he derived his realistic qualities, his scientific method and his critical spirit. In personal

appearance, Flaubert was distinctly Norman. Big and robust, a bull-necked giant, he wore a heavy moustache that might have done honor to the companions of Robert Guiscard; and his large gray eyes shone with the melancholy light of the North. As a youth he was restless and disillusioned, living in an imaginary world. He read with zest the poets and romancers, but submitted at the same time to the scientific discipline demanded by his father. This father, a pupil of Cabanis, Bichat and the philosophic school, felt for religion mild disdain. Gustave's mother had been reared in the Deistic tradition of the eighteenth century. Accordingly, he could not be expected to like the priests. A born pagan, he was convinced that death ends all. His father, who was as indifferent to literature as to religion, doubted the use of writing except for mere amusement, and confirmed his son in the belief that the world hated art. Indeed, according to Paul Bourget, Flaubert had not an idea in common with his father or with the good people of Rouen. Little wonder that he was a rebellious pupil with scant respect for his masters.

To the realm of letters, however, the precocious lad devoted himself, acknowledging the sway of Rabelais, Montaigne, Ronsard, Shakespeare, Spinoza, Goethe, and the romanticists. His first writings were saturated with reminiscences of *Faust*, *Hamlet*, *René*, and *Childe Harold*. By the age of eleven he had composed thirty tragedies and melodramas, many of which were enacted with friends in the family billiard room. During the next decade, plays, short stories and essays continued to flow from his pen. Unlike the works of his maturity, these were often autobiographical, reflecting his dreams and disappointments. Thus, in his *Voyage en Enfer*, written at fourteen, it is this present world that turns out to be Hades, and similar disenchantment marks his autobiographical essay, *Mémoires d'un Fou* (1838) and the early version of his first novel, *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1845). In the essay he wrote: "I have scarcely seen life, yet a deep disgust has entered my soul; I have carried to my lips all its fruits, but they seem to me bitter; I have refused them, and now I die of hunger. To die so young, without hope in death, without being sure of sleep in the tomb, without knowing if your peace be inviolable! To throw yourself into the arms of annihila-

tion and to doubt if they will receive you!" In *Novembre*, the hero declares: "I was born with the desire to die. Reared without religion, like others of my age, I lacked the dry satisfaction of the atheists and the ironic nonchalance of the sceptics." Here occurs the macabre reflection: "It is sweet to imagine that one has ceased to be. It is so calm in the cemeteries." Even though life seemed to the youthful author "a continuous indigestion" and "a succession of partial deaths," he found consolation in the thought that his ashes might serve to make the tulips grow.

Broodings of this sort imply in Flaubert no pathological weakness, for up to the age of twenty he was physically perfect. He merely voiced the romantic weariness of his generation. At sixteen he had complained of "the burden of life" which had "weighed upon him from birth." "Yes," he declared in his essay on Rabelais, "life rests heavily upon those who have wings; the more ample the wings, the more we agonize." Indeed, he spent his days in trying to prove that for man it is thought that constitutes the source of his worst sufferings. Since to think and to suffer are the same, the most intellectual man is also the most unhappy. Flaubert never saw a child without reflecting that it would grow old, nor a cradle without thinking of a tomb. His griefs were crowned when his father made him study jurisprudence. "I know of nothing more foolish," he wrote, "than the law, unless it be the study of the law." He now beheld the future, which he had dreamed of as beautiful and poetic, turned into something monotonous and dull. But a nervous breakdown in 1843 spared him the torture of practising a "bourgeois" profession. For some years following his collapse Flaubert lived in seclusion, except for a short journey to Italy. After the deaths of his father and his sister Caroline in 1846 he went to reside with his mother at Croisset, below Rouen. Here he spent the remainder of his life, save for a short sojourn in Tunis and an occasional visit to Paris.

After 1850 the only events in the life of Flaubert were those connected with the conception, the elaboration, and the publication of his books. His work, much as he sought to eliminate from it his personality, remained the product of his character, his temperament, and his time. He was both proud and timid, disliking

those who differed from him, feeling himself superior even as a school boy to his fellow pupils and his masters, yet afraid of them. He resisted direction and resented any failure to respond to his friendship. As romancer and dramatist he got on but poorly with his colleagues, scorning publishers and critics. Of the critics he would say: "Why worry over what the blackbirds chatter?" Even Sainte-Beuve's "lymphatic licorice water" did not escape his sarcasm.

Flaubert, by reason of this pride, timidity, and irritability, was a lonely misanthrope. "I have so often been humiliated," he wrote to Louise Colet in 1846, "that I have long since come to recognize that in order to live at peace one must live alone, and shut his windows against the poisonous air of the world." He liked it at Croisset because there he was "far from the Rouennais, who were offensive to him as only compatriots can be." At thirty-two he declared that daily he felt growing within him an aversion for his fellows. He never believed in moral perfectionism, nor yielded to the sensibility and humanitarianism then in fashion. With him it was a principle that "Intellectual egoism is the heroism of thought." Travel no less than seclusion fostered his contempt for mankind. Owing to these various influences, there developed in him a sort of monomania of dislike for brutality, and the bourgeois. He studied both in order to hate both the more. So he became a literary ascetic, regarding humanity with a malign laughter sadder than tears. In this he remained true to his earlier conviction. At the age of seventeen he had affirmed: "I admire profoundly only two men, Rabelais and Byron, who alone have written in order to decry the human race and to laugh it in the face."

Such was the character of Flaubert's dual temperament, fundamentally romantic, but in maturity exhibiting, also, profoundly realistic traits. Flaubert, indeed, seems to have incarnated the literary tendencies not only of his own generation but also of that which preceded his. His genius was double, he confessed, although at heart he preferred romanticism. Hence his interest in imaginative and satiric writers. Although he disliked Lamartine and Musset, his favorites were Homer, Plautus, Rabelais, Ronsard, Shakespeare, Chateaubriand, Byron, Victor Hugo.

Although he admired the art of Boileau, he cared little for calm, unimaginative temperaments such as Sophocles, Horace, Descartes, and Racine. He rarely mentioned the Classicists of the seventeenth century. He lamented the fact that realistic themes "forced themselves upon him." Probably, as one critic has expressed it, imagination was his Muse and reality his conscience. In other words, he deemed it a duty to divide his attention between the two forms of art. Thanks to his sense of proportion, however, when striving after perfection in either he borrowed from the other only what was appropriate.

In Flaubert's chief works, then, realism and romanticism alternate. After the realistic *Madame Bovary* (1856), followed the romantic *Salammbô* (1862); after the realistic *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869), the romantic *Tentation de Saint Antoine* (1874); then came *Trois Contes* (1877), combining both, and the unfinished realistic *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881). Thus he swung between the two, governed by beauty, sweet with mystery and truth, bitter with doubt.

There was no evolution in Flaubert's method of composition, at least among his major works. In *Par les Champs et par les Grèves* (1847), as in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, written thirty years later, we find the same meticulous care in polishing individual passages. "You do not realize," he wrote to George Sand, "what it means to remain all day with your head in your hands, pressing it to find a single word. Ah, but I have known the agonies of style!" He excelled in producing powerful effects through metaphors, compressing into a single line an image of imposing proportions. He excelled, also, in rendering eloquent the slightest objects. His language was rich but simple. Unlike the Goncourts and other "impressionists," he refused to do violence to it, attaining his ends by using words in their natural and ordinary meaning. He possessed a keen sense for the music of words, knowing the exact cadences appropriate to produce the effects he desired.

Naturally this devotee of art for art's sake wished the artist to be no defender of a doctrine, political, moral, or social. Such preoccupations, he felt, would diminish the dignity and universality of his work. He never wrote for the masses, whom he dis-

dained. He felt that art was a thing sacred and apart, to be profaned by stooping to the vulgar. It was his reluctance to confide in his readers that caused him to formulate a creed of impassiveness and impersonality. As early as 1846 he boasted: "I have always refused to put anything of myself into my works." Respect for truth, however, compelled him to add, "And yet I have included much of myself there." The second part of this confession is not less significant than the first. In Flaubert's words, the author in his work should be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere. In the opinion of Flaubert, an artist is not his own master. "To express what I think! That is something charming of which I have deprived myself." Accordingly, he sought to depict tastes, visions, and sensations contrary to his own. "I was born with a lot of vices," he used to say, "which have never put their nose out of the window. I like wine, yet I do not drink. I am a gambler, yet I never touch a card. Debauchery pleases me, yet I live like a monk. I am a mystic, yet I believe in nothing." In other words, his advice to a writer was this: "You will depict wine, love, women, and glory on condition that you are neither a drunkard, nor a lover, nor a husband, nor a soldier. In the midst of life, one sees it badly; he suffers, or enjoys too much."

At the suggestion of his friend Louis Bouilhet, Flaubert took the theme of *Madame Bovary* from the actual matrimonial woes of an obscure country physician, Delamare, who had practised at Ry, a village in Normandy. Of this theme the novel presents two chief aspects. One is the study of the decline from grace of a woman heartless and vulgar but fond of luxury and the satisfactions of sense. The other is the scrupulous portrayal of the pettiness of provincial life. If Balzac had a piercing eye, he lacked the large and comprehensive glance that could include much at a time. This gift Flaubert possessed. Whereas Balzac first made the framework to hold his action before introducing his characters, Flaubert taught his disciples to paint in their backgrounds while developing situations and amid the dialogue. The picture of provincial manners here is rivalled by that of the characters.

The fond illusions of the unfaithful wife are comparable only

to the dull naïveté of the unsuspecting husband. Emma's life is a struggle between her real self and her imagined self, a false ideal, resulting in her misery and suicide. Her husband is a nonentity, deficient in intelligence, will, and imagination, but given a distinct individuality by the author.

Six years after the publication of this masterpiece, appeared the epic romance *Salammbô*, the finest specimen of Flaubert's romantic art. To him ancient Carthage stood for the Orient, the desire for which obsessed his romantic life. He was homesick for the exotic as affording an escape from the commonplace. Such a subject permitted him to employ also the rich vocabulary that he had learned from Victor Hugo. If he loved Carthage, it was because she offered him so many living types; and if he regretted anything, it was that the present seemed so inferior to the past. Hence the melancholy that permeates *Salammbô*. As usual, Flaubert went to the pains of thorough documentation, reading for his reconstruction of antiquity not less than fifteen hundred volumes. The work turns upon the conflict between the barbarian mercenaries and the Carthaginians who employed and deceived them. History furnished him his chief personages: Hamilcar Barca and his son Hannibal; Matho, a Libyan; Spendius, a Greek; Narr' Havas, a Numidian; and the Carthaginian leader Hanno; but Flaubert created the character of the beautiful Salammbô, sister of Hannibal. The true heroine, however, is Carthage itself, luxurious and incredibly rich. The novel, swift in action and fairly free from digression, is remarkable for its portraits and descriptions. Here too may be found the most perfect expression of Flaubert's pessimism. His hatred of human brutality, shown slightly in *Madame Bovary*, and increasingly in *L'Éducation sentimentale* and *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, rises to a climax in *Salammbô*.

This novel, then, and *Madame Bovary* must rank as the best creations of Flaubert, the romanticist-realist. Yet, some critics have held that these are excelled by some of his other works. Whereas Brunetière characterizes the charming short story, *La Légende de Saint Julien*, as Flaubert's poorest piece, Émile Hennequin considers it "the most divine prose of its century." Whereas *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, an allegorical poem on the theme of



*Faust*, impresses Brunetière as "bizarre and tedious," it delighted Saintsbury, and is styled by Remy de Gourmont as "more than a masterpiece." Similarly, *L'Éducation sentimentale*, a study of the malady of the will, disliked by some, is regarded by others as the novelist's supreme creation. Equally divergent are the opinions expressed concerning *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, which seems to point the uselessness of all activity, mental and physical. Not less disenchanting is the message of *La Tentation*, an allegory which catalogues the follies of men and exhibits the inevitable cycle of faith, philosophy, and agnosticism. Here, according to Émile Hennequin, is reflected Flaubert's troubled soul, torn between his love of reality and his dislike of it, yearning for beauty yet finding it only in an imaginatively recreated antiquity. Scarcely more attractive is life as portrayed in *Un Cœur simple*, the story of a humble servant. Abandoned by her lover, maltreated by her first employers, bereft of her beloved nephew and the daughter of her second mistress, Félicité eventually bestows her affection upon a parrot, only to see this creature poisoned by a miscreant. Similar disillusion marks *L'Éducation*. Frédéric Moreau in his declining years realizes that life, far from affording the enchantment that he had sentimentally anticipated, weaves for him only a colorless web of deceptions and disappointments.

Flaubert thirsted for the absolute; but, unable to discover it, within or without himself, he conceived it to lie in the Written Phrase. With Buffon, he believed that the fashion in which truth is enunciated is even more useful to humanity than the truth itself. Thus he professed contempt for Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* because of its defective style. Nor did lucidity alone satisfy Flaubert. He desired a unity in activity among the phrases in a book like the motion of leaves in a forest, all different though associated. His patience, his courage, his artistic honesty, will always remain an inspiration. In sacrificing everything to art—pleasure, money, success, and health—this master of realism gave the finest example of practical idealism.

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